

OUTDOOR EDUCATION COOK COUNTY STYLE

Conservation is an activity which concerns everyone. Not infrequently the action of individuals and groups both public and private creates a condition adverse to sound conservation. Vigilance is therefore essential to keep such problems at a minimum. Your conservation committee has this watch-dog function. It has been obligated to report many unpopular and unwise attitudes and occurrences. This kind of reporting, despite its necessity and usefulness, is depressing to write and to read.

Occasionally, however, there appears an organization so pragmatic in its purposes and so skillful in its function that the whole field of conservation could benefit by its example. This report deals with such an organization.

Just outside of the city of Chicago is a block of land comprising about 45,000 acres, sixty per cent of which is forested. Eighty per cent can be called "wild" land in that it is not under formal cultivation nor managed as a park.

This area is known as the Cook County Forest Preserve.

What is its purpose and the policy of its staff? The purpose of the Preserve may be briefly stated thus: "to preserve for all time and for all people, the forests of the county and the necessary lands connecting them." By charter these lands are dedicated to the education, recreation, and enjoyment of the people. Here then are the physical facilities to create or broaden the meaning of conservation for many people. To implement the proposed program, the administrators of the Cook County Forest Preserve created a Department of Conservation. Its activities are many and varied.

One of the first efforts undertaken was to acquaint the people of Chicago, particularly the children, with the Preserve. To this end organized field trips were conducted through various sections. Each trip was guided by a competent naturalist. As interest grew, more time was required for field trips, particularly as groups became larger. Facilities for overnight camping within a reasonable distance from Chicago are virtually nonexistent. The inevitable solution was the "day-camp." Daytime camping in the Cook County Forest Preserve by thousands of Chicago youngsters provides the condition under which principles of conservation can best be taught. The program for day-campers is diversified but one of the major activities is the study of natural history—the way plants and animals live together.

It is an impressive sight to see eager children respond to outdoor teaching. Many of the day-campers come from families in the lower income brackets where even day-camping without the facilities of the Cook County Forest Preserve would be out of the question. Fundamentals of botany, forestry, and aquatic and terrestrial zoology are taught in simple, understandable language. The many plant associations and aquatic environments serve as natural laboratories for demonstration.

It is at such day-camps that the foundations for sound attitudes toward our renewable resources are laid. It is here that we will win (or lose) the conservation battles to be fought in the future. Karl Beringer once said "Delight in knowing and understanding the beauty of nature's spectacles adds to the intrinsic quality of our lives, and at decisive moments may have a deeper influence than we can measure."

Adult training programs are also undertaken although the greater emphasis is on the youth program. In-service training in outdoor teaching is part of the adult program.

During the school season the staff continues its program of education by going directly into the public schools. Lectures on natural history and conservation reach new audiences and stimulate new interests. These lectures bring more children to the Cook County

Forest Preserve who, in turn, become better able to enjoy and understand the benefits of a conservation program.

So that no potential interest in natural history may go unsolicited, the Cook County Forest Preserve staff has even utilized radio in an attempt to enlighten and train with a series of broadcasts on out-of-door topics. These have been successful beyond expectation.

Not satisfied with only an educational and recreational program, the staff of the Preserve has gone into waterfowl research, and in 1947 reported on one of the finest jobs of duck banding in the Midwest. This report, entitled "Waterfowl Banding at McGinnis Slough Orland Wildlife Refuge for the Years 1944 and 1945" contains much important information on ducks of the Chicago area. It also has been used to clarify other waterfowl problems of the Mississippi flyway.

Last, but not least of the contributions to child and adult education, the Cook County Forest Preserve publishes a series of nature bulletins. These are one-page articles dealing with ideas, persons, species of plants or animals, geological formations, water in its various forms, etc. The lucid and delightful presentation of subjects pertaining to natural history has doubtless gone far in spreading knowledge to all age groups. This weekly almanac of ideas has a distribution of about 6,500 copies. They are sent to 135 newspapers, about 50 foreign language papers, all of the big Chicago dailies and other newspapers in the Chicago area. Virtually all the public and parochial schools in Chicago and Cook County are on the mailing list for one or more copies. It may be difficult to measure the benefits of this medium of outdoor education, but that there are benefits is undeniable. These leaflets deal with facts such as names, places, weights, height, etc., but each closes with a catchy line, a witty phrase, or a moral. For example, the leaflet entitled "Arbor Day" closed with "'Mighty oaks from little acorns grow,' but the giant sequoia grow from tiny flat seeds about the size of a pin head"; the article on "Mussels" closes thus: "There are two sexes but the difference is important only to another clam"; and the leaflet entitled "Crickets," ends with "The cricket leads a merry life: meek and voiceless is his wife." The Aesop-like flavor to this medium of education makes each lesson pleasant reading. The single page is suitable for posting on bulletin boards.

Who is responsible for the operation of this conservation organization that covers the ground from field trips, day-camps, and trailside museums to scientific waterfowl research?

There are many men who have had a hand in this laudable effort. Administrators, public officials, philanthropists, and civic-minded citizens have all played a part. In our opinion, the lion's share of the credit must go to Roberts Mann, Superintendent of Conservation. Seven years ago he was joined by Dr. David H. Thompson, Senior Naturalist of the Cook County Forest Preserve. Together these two field-wise naturalists are bringing conservation to places and people where conservation and wild creatures in nature are new ideas under the sun.

The Conservation Committee of the Wilson Club takes this opportunity to commend the Cook County Forest Preserve as well as Superintendent Mann and his staff for efficiently accomplishing the momentous task of bringing a conservation consciousness to the Chicago region.—Robert A. McCabe.